Comparative study on WHO Western Pacific Region and World Federation of Chinese Medicine Societies international standard terminologies on traditional medicine: Syndrome Differentiation of Spleen Diseases

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The spleen, located in the middle region of the sanjiao (also known as the triple energizer) below the diaphragm, is actually quite different from the organ with the same name in modern medicine. According to traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), the main physiological functions of the spleen include transportation and transformation, elevating lucid substance and commanding the blood to flow. Its meridian, known as the spleen meridian of foot-taiyin, is internally and externally related to the stomach meridian of foot-yangming. Both the spleen and the stomach are the organs of the digestive system, responsible for transporting and transforming nutrients of water and food for the production of qi, blood, fluid and humor. That is why the spleen and stomach are taken as the source of qi and blood as well as the postnatal base of life.

In Siwen (Plain Conversation) which is one of the fascicles of Huangdi Neijing (Yellow Emperor’s Canon of Medicine), it says that “the spleen and stomach are just like the officer in charge of the granary who provide nutrients for the whole body”. According to the theory of TCM, the spleen opens into the mouth, manifestes its luster over the lips, corresponds to earth in the five
elements (also known as five phases), and is related to thinking in emotions and saliva in humors.

In *WHO International Standard Terminologies on Traditional Medicine in the Western Pacific Region*\(^1\) (abbreviated as WPRO Standard), about 20 terms related to the spleen are included with brief definitions. Some of the terms are regarded as synonyms. However, careful analysis shows that there are still some obvious or subtle differences between these terms. In *International Standard Chinese-English Basic Nomenclature of Chinese Medicine* compiled by World Federation of Chinese Medicine Societies\(^2\) (abbreviated as WFCMS Standard), more terms related to the spleen are included with no definitions.

This article tries to make a comparative study on how to translate and standardize the terms and concepts related to the spleen according to the studies made in the book entitled *International Standardization of English Translation of Traditional Chinese Medicine: Study of Theory, Summarization of Practice and Exploration of Methods*\(^3\).

脾病辨证 spleen diseases pattern identification/syndrome differentiation: visceral pattern identification/syndrome differentiation dealing with spleen diseases

If the translation of 脾病辨证 is changed into “pattern identification/syndrome differentiation of spleen diseases”, it may sound more natural. It is true that a noun in the English language, usually in its singular form, can be used to modify another noun. In this case the first noun actually serves as an adjective. However, in “spleen diseases pattern identification/syndrome differentiation”, the word “diseases” is in plural form, and thus does not sound quite natural when used to modify “pattern identification/syndrome differentiation”.

脾虚证 spleen deficiency pattern/syndrome: any deficiency pattern/syndrome of the spleen, including deficiency of spleen qi, yin and yang

In the current translation practice, 脾虚证 is also frequently rendered as “syndrome/pattern of spleen deficiency”. However, “spleen deficiency pattern/syndrome” appears more concise. In TCM, 脾虚证 can be caused by various factors, such as stomach heat, liver depression, liver effulgence and liver heat. When caused by stomach heat, it is called 胃热脾虚证 (syndrome of stomach heat and spleen deficiency), due to heat retention in the stomach and deficiency of spleen qi with the manifestations of fever with dysphoria and thirst, poor appetite, epigastric upset, burning pain, abdominal distension, loose stool, or retention of feces, thinness and lassitude, etc. When caused by liver depression, it is called 肝郁脾虚证 (syndrome of liver depression (stagnation) and spleen deficiency) due to failure of the liver and the spleen to function normally with the manifestations of distension and pain of hypochondrium, abdominal distension, reduced appetite, emotional depression, loose stool, unsmooth defecation, or abdominal pain with defecation desire, alleviation of pain after defecation, slow and wiry pulse, etc. When caused by liver effulgence, it is called 肝郁脾虚证 (syndrome of liver effulgence and spleen deficiency) due to counterflow of liver qi that leads to spleen deficiency and the failure to transport normally with the manifestations of distension of hypochondrium, hypochondria pain, emotional depression, anorexia, reduced appetite, abdominal distension with the desire to defecate, loose stool, slow and wiry pulse, etc. When caused by liver heat, it is called 肝热脾虚证 (syndrome of liver heat and spleen deficiency) due to superabundant heat in the liver meridian that leads to deficiency of spleen qi with the manifestations of burning sensation and distending pain in hypochondrium, dizziness, hastiness, bitter taste and dryness in mouth, abdominal distension, reduced appetite, loose stool, wiry and rapid pulse, etc.

脾气虚证; 脾气虚证 spleen qi deficiency pattern/syndrome: a pattern/syndrome marked by dizziness, fatigue, sallow face, indigestion, abdominal distension, lassitude, anorexia and loose bowels

In TCM, 脾气虚证 and 脾气亏虚证 are similar, to some extent, to each other in meaning. However, they are two separate terms and thus need to be translated separately. If 脾气虚证 is translated as “spleen qi deficiency pattern/syndrome”, then 脾气亏虚证 may be reasonably rendered as “spleen qi depletion-deficiency pattern/syndrome”.

脾失健运 pattern/syndrome of spleen failing in transportation: a pattern/syndrome that occurs in any deficiency condition of the spleen and that is often characterized by anorexia, abdominal distension, diarrhea, borborygmi, and in chronic cases, emaciation, lack of strength and edema of limbs

In WFCMS Standard\(^1\), there is the concept of 脾失健运 which is literally translated as “dysfunction of spleen in transportation”, but there is no such a term of 脾失健运. In fact, 脾失健运 is usually used to describe the pathogenesis of some
spleen diseases, and seldom taken as a pattern/syndrome in TCM. As to the translation of the Chinese character 失 in 脾失健运, obviously failure equivalent to the implication of 失 in the original term, is much better than dysfunction, which sounds too modern and ambiguous.

脾阴虚证; 脾阴亏虚证 spleen yin deficiency pattern/syndrome: a pattern/syndrome attributed to deficiency of yin fluid with impaired splenic transportation, and marked by hunger with inability to eat, emaciation and lassitude.

In TCM, 脾阴虚证 and 脾阴亏虚证 are two separate terms, though bearing certain similarities with each other. For the convenience of international communication, it is better to translate them differently to maintain their implied meanings in the English translation. If 脾阴虚证 is translated as “spleen yin deficiency pattern/syndrome”, then 脾阴亏虚证 can be rendered as “spleen yin depletion-deficiency pattern/syndrome”. In the Chinese language, 亏 (reduction, loss or depletion) and 虚 (deficiency, weakness) imply a cause-and-effect relationship. When something is reduced in quantity, it will consequently become deficient and weak. Since in WPRO Standard[1] and WFCMS Standard[2], 亏 is translated as “depletion” and 虚 is rendered as “deficiency”, then the Chinese phrase 亏虚 may be reasonably translated as “depletion-deficiency”.

脾阳虚证; 脾阳亏虚证; 脾虚寒证 spleen yang deficiency pattern/syndrome: a pattern/syndrome attributed to insufficient yang qi failing to warm and activate the spleen, usually manifested by cold limbs, coldness and pain in the abdomen, anorexia, abdominal fullness, chronic diarrhea, lassitude, emaciation and edema, the same as the spleen deficiency cold pattern/syndrome.

In TCM, 脾阳虚证, 脾阳亏虚证 and 脾虚寒证 are three separate terms which bear both similarities and subtle differences in meaning. Besides the clinical manifestations mentioned in the above definition, 脾阳虚证 still includes the signs and symptoms of loose stool, or dropsy of lower limbs, or profuse leucorrhrea in women, pale tongue with white moist coating, and deep, slow and feeble pulse, etc. For the convenience of communication, 脾阳亏虚证 and 脾虚寒证 can be respectively translated as “spleen yang depletion-deficiency pattern/syndrome” and “spleen deficiency cold pattern/syndrome”. In TCM, there is another term 脾气虚证, also similar to 脾阳虚证 in meaning, which can be rendered as “spleen yang deficiency-debilitation pattern/syndrome”.

脾不统血证 pattern/syndrome of spleen failing to control the blood: a pattern/syndrome that arises when weak spleen qi fails to control blood, resulting in various kinds of chronic bleeding such as purpura, flooding and spotting in women, accompanied by sallow complexion, anorexia, loose bowels, lassitude, lack of strength, shortness of breath, reluctance to speak, pale tongue and weak pulse.

According to the theory of TCM, 心主血 (the heart governs/controls the blood) while 脾统血 (the spleen commands/leads the blood). In the English language, the words “govern” and “control” are the same in meaning. If 心主血 is translated as “the heart governs the blood” and 脾统血 as “the spleen controls the blood”, it seems that there is no difference between the heart and the spleen in dealing with the blood. In fact in Chinese language, the character 主 and the character 统 are quite different in meaning, 主 means to govern, or to control or to dominate over, while 统 means to command or to lead. For this reason, 统血 may be better translated as “commanding the blood” instead of “controlling the blood”.

脾虚气陷证; 脾气下陷证 sunken spleen qi pattern/syndrome: a pattern/syndrome marked by epigastric bearing-down sensation, more prominent after meals, or urgency of defecation at short intervals with bearing-down feeling of the anus, or chronic persistent diarrhea, or prolapse of the rectum or uterus, associated with shortness of breath, lassitude, reluctance to speak, dizziness, pale tongue with white coating, and relaxed weak pulse, the same as the pattern/syndrome of spleen deficiency with sunken qi.

Just as analyzed in the discussion about the translation of 脾阳虚证, 脾阳亏虚证 and 脾虚寒证 as well as other similar cases mentioned above, it is better to translate 脾虚气陷证 and 脾气下陷证 separately because they are two separate terms that bear both certain similarities and subtle differences in meaning. According to the implications, 脾虚气陷证 can be translated as “spleen deficiency and qi sinking pattern/syndrome” while 脾气下陷证 can be rendered as “spleen qi sinking syndrome”. Semantically speaking, 脾虚气陷证 implies a cause-and-effect relationship in which 脾虚 (spleen deficiency) is the cause while气陷 (qi sinking) is the effect. But the term 脾气下陷证 just emphasizes the effect of spleen qi sinking without mentioning the cause of spleen
deficiency, although the cause is obvious.

脾虚湿困证 pattern/syndrome of spleen deficiency with dampness encumbrance: a pattern/syndrome marked by epigastric distension, poor appetite, borborygmi, diarrhea, nausea, thirst but no desire to drink, lassitude, and dense and slippery tongue coating, the same as the pattern/syndrome of spleen deficiency with dampness accumulation.

In the term 脾虚湿困证, how to decode 困 is key to the translation of the whole term. In Chinese, the character 困 means tired or difficult. When it is used as a verb, it means to be stranded or to be hard pressed. The so-called 脾虚湿困 implies that accumulation and retention of dampness in the spleen makes the spleen difficult to perform its normal functions. For this reason, in WFCMS Standard[2], this term is translated as “spleen deficiency with dampness retention”. Comparatively speaking, to translate the Chinese character 困 as “encumbrance” is more vivid and differential than “retention”.

脾虚动风证 pattern/syndrome of spleen deficiency with stirring of wind: a pattern/syndrome marked by tremor of the limbs or convulsions associated with reduced food intake, abdominal distension, loose bowels, lassitude, lack of strength, pale complexion, pale tongue and weak pulse.

To translate the Chinese character 动 in 脾虚动风证 as stirring sounds quite vivid and such a translation is quite popularly used in the current translation practice. However, if the translation of 脾虚动风证 is adjusted as “pattern/syndrome of spleen deficiency stirring wind”, it may sound more reasonable. Because 脾虚动风证 also implies a cause-and-effect relationship in which 脾虚 is the cause and 动风 is the effect. In WPRO Standard[1], some of the similar terms are just dealt in such a way. For instance, 热盛动风证 is translated as “pattern/syndrome of exuberant heat stirring wind”, 暑热动风证 is translated as “pattern/syndrome of summerheat-stirring wind” and 疾热动风证 is translated as “pattern/syndrome of phlegm-heat stirring wind”.

脾虚水泛证 pattern/syndrome of spleen deficiency with water flood: a pattern/syndrome marked by edema of the face and the limbs or together with ascites, associated with reduced food intake, abdominal distension, sloppy stools, lassitude, lack of strength, pale complexion, pale plump tongue with white slippery coating, and soggy or weak pulse.

In the current translation practice, the Chinese phrase 水泛 in 脾虚水泛证 is often literally translated as edema, which is certainly inaccurate. In WFCMS Standard[2], 脾虚水泛 is rendered as “syndrome/pattern of spleen insufficiency and water diffusion”. It seems improper to translate 脾虚 as “spleen insufficiency” because “deficiency” is now almost the internationally standardized translation of the Chinese concept 虚. To translate the Chinese characters 水泛 as “water diffusion” sounds reasonable because the Chinese character 水泛 just means to spread far and widely. However, comparatively speaking, “water flood” sounds more equivalent to the original Chinese phrase 水泛.

寒湿困脾证; 湿困脾阳证 pattern/syndrome of cold-dampness encumbering the spleen: a pattern/syndrome marked by epigastric and abdominal distension, stickiness and tastelessness in the mouth, nausea, loose bowels, heaviness sensation of the head and body, or jaundice with dull yellow discoloration, pale plump tongue with white slimy coating and soggy relaxed pulse.

In TCM, 寒湿困脾证 and 湿困脾阳证 may sound similar to each other. However, they are still two separate terms in which 湿 is a general and simple cause while 寒湿 is a specific and compound cause. If 寒湿困脾证 is translated as “pattern/syndrome of cold-dampness encumbering the spleen”, then 湿困脾阳证 can be translated as “pattern/syndrome of dampness encumbering the spleen”. In WFCMS Standard[2], the Chinese character 困 is translated as “disturb”, sounding somewhat unspecific. Comparatively speaking, the English word “encumber” appears more equivalent to the Chinese character 困 in meaning.

湿热蕴脾证 pattern/syndrome of dampness-heat in the spleen: a pattern/syndrome marked by epigastric and abdominal distension, stickiness and tastelessness in the mouth, nausea, loose bowels, heaviness sensation of the head and body, or jaundice with dull yellow discoloration, pale plump tongue with white slimy coating and soggy relaxed pulse.

To translate 湿热蕴脾证 as “pattern/syndrome of dampness-heat in the spleen” seems unclear because the Chinese character 蕴, a key element in this term, is overlooked in this translation. If it is translated as “pattern/syndrome of dampness-heat accumulating in the spleen” or “pattern/syndrome of dampness-heat accumulation in the spleen”, it may sound clearer in meaning. The
Chinese character 堵 means aggregation or accumulation. In WFCMS Standard\(^2\), this term is rendered as “syndrome/pattern of dampness-heat accumulation in spleen”. Such a translation is certainly clearer and more accurate than the translation in WPRO Standard\(^1\).

脾胃虚寒证；中焦湿热证 pattern/syndrome of dampness-heat in the spleen and stomach: a pattern/syndrome marked by epigastric or abdominal distention, anorexia, nausea, vomiting, lassitude, heaviness sensation of the body, or jaundice with bright yellow discoloration of the skin and the white of the eyes, yellow dense and slimy tongue coating, the same as the pattern/syndrome of dampness-heat in the middle energizer

In TCM, the region where the spleen and stomach are located is called the middle region of sanjiao. That is why the spleen and stomach are often regarded as equivalent to the middle region of sanjiao. Though equivalent to each other, the spleen and the stomach and the middle region of sanjiao are two different concepts and thus need to be translated differently so as to make a distinction between them. Therefore, if 脾胃虚寒证 is translated as “pattern/syndrome of dampness-heat in the spleen and stomach”, then 中焦湿热证 can be translated as “pattern/syndrome of dampness-heat in the middle region of sanjiao” or “pattern/syndrome of dampness-heat in the zhongjiao”. The Chinese concept 三焦 is translated quite differently in the current translation practice. Besides “triple energizer” is used in the international standard nomenclature of acupuncture approved by WPRO in the early 90s in the 20th century, it is also frequently translated as “three warmers”, “three heaters” or “three burners”. At the second international meeting on World Health Organization/International Classification of Traditional Medicine held in Tokyo in December 2010, it was agreed to transliterate 三焦 as sanjiao in order to maintain its original meaning in the Chinese language.

脾胃虚寒证；脾胃阳虚证 spleen-stomach deficiency cold pattern/syndrome: a pattern/syndrome attributed to insufficient yang qi to warm the spleen and stomach with endogenous cold, and manifested by cold and pains over the stomach, accompanied by anorexia, abdominal fullness, belching, vomiting thin fluid, chronic diarrhea, lassitude and cold limbs, the same as the spleen-stomach yang deficiency pattern/syndrome

In TCM, 脾胃虚寒证 and 脾胃阳虚证 are closely related to each other with obvious similarities between them. However, they are two separate terms and thus should be translated separately. If 脾胃虚寒证 is translated as “spleen-stomach deficiency cold pattern/syndrome”, then 脾胃阳虚证 can be translated as “spleen and stomach yang deficiency pattern/syndrome”. Of course deficiency of yang will consequently lead to production of cold in the spleen and stomach. But as translation, it is better to translate the term and concept in question as it is in the original language.

脾胃虚寒证 中焦虚寒证 spleen-stomach weakness pattern/syndrome: a combined pattern/syndrome of spleen qi deficiency and stomach qi deficiency

In TCM, the spleen and stomach are often used together as one single concept. In WPRO Standard\(^1\), sometimes it uses a hyphen between the spleen and stomach as done in “脾胃虚弱证 spleen-stomach weakness pattern/syndrome” and “脾胃虚寒证 spleen-stomach deficiency cold pattern/syndrome”. However, in some other cases, conjunction “and” is used instead of a hyphen, such as in “脾胃湿热证 pattern/syndrome of dampness-heat in the spleen and stomach”. For the sake of standardization, it is better to unify such a practice.

脾胃阴虚证 spleen-stomach yin deficiency pattern/syndrome: a pattern/syndrome attributed to insufficient yin fluid to moisten the spleen and stomach, and manifested by dry mouth and throat, hunger but no desire for food, gastric upset, abdominal distension and dull pain, retching and hicough, leanness, constipation, reddened tongue lacking moisture and fine rapid pulse

In TCM, 脾胃阴虚证 (spleen-stomach yin deficiency pattern/syndrome) is a pattern/syndrome characterized by internal harassment of deficiency-heat due to depletion and damage of yin humor in the spleen and stomach that leads to scanty moisture in the spleen and stomach and hypofunction of the spleen and stomach in reception of food and transportation of nutrients. In WFCMS Standard\(^2\), 脾胃阴虚证 is translated as “syndrome/pattern of spleen-stomach deficiency”, similar to that in WPRO Standard\(^1\). In the definition, the phrase “hunger but no desire for food” may be the translation of the Chinese term 食不欲食 which is often translated as “hunger without desire for food”.

脾胃不和证 spleen-stomach disharmony pattern/syndrome: a pattern/syndrome attributed to stagnation of qi movement that causes dysfunction of the spleen and stomach, and manifested by epigastric
stiffness and distension, anorexia, sloppy stool, belching, borborygm and string-like pulse

In WFCMS Standard\textsuperscript{12}, 脾胃不和证 is translated in the same way as that in WPRO Standard\textsuperscript{11}. In this definition, the phrase “epigastric stiffness and distension” may be the translation of the Chinese term 心下痞满 which, according to the current translation practice, is often translated as “epigastric stiffness and fullness”. In TCM, 脾 refers to either stiffness, which may be just a subjective feeling, or mass, which is a concrete aggregation in the abdomen. The word “anorexia” may be the translation of the Chinese term 纳差 which means no appetite or poor appetite. The phrase “sloppy stool” may be the translation of the Chinese term 大便溏泄 which is also frequently translated as “loose stool”. The phrase “string-like pulse” may be the translation of the Chinese term 脉弦 which is also often translated as “taut pulse” or “wiry pulse”.

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WHO 西太区与世界中医药学会联合会中医名词术语国际标准比较研究：脾病辨证

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关键词：语言学；科学术语；翻译；英语；中医名词；脾病辨证